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The Banqueting House

WHITEHALL

By JOHN CHARLTON, M.V.O., F.S.A.

HISTORY

THE Banqueting House is a memorial to the Stuarts. Built by James I and splendidly adorned with paintings by Rubens at the command of Charles I, it was the scene of the latter's execution and of his eldest son's restoration. Lastly, it was there, in 1689, after the flight of James II, that William of Orange and Mary received the formal offer of the throne from both Houses of Parliament. The building is also of great importance architecturally as well as historically as the work of one of our greatest architects, Inigo Jones, and one which eventually helped to set the style for large public and private building until well into the nineteenth century.

The title "Banqueting House" gives only a narrow definition of the manifold purposes for which the building was used. Banquets of the most splendid sort were indeed given there by the King; but it was also the grand reception-room for foreign embassies, where ambassadors presented letters of credence and the gifts of their sovereigns; and from 1622 till the installation of the Rubens ceiling in 1635 it was the scene of masques, the favourite entertainment of the early Stuart court. Later it saw such traditional ceremonies as the annual Maundy Thursday observance. Indeed it was the scene of a whole group of state and court ceremonies, now divided mainly between Windsor Castle, Buckingham Palace, the Mansion House and Westminster Abbey. It was, in fact, a focal point in the life of the seventeenth-century court, which was then established in the sovereign's main London residence—the Palace of Whitehall. This stretched, west to east, approximately from St. James's Park to what are now the Embankment Gardens, and north to south from the present War Office almost to Parliament Square.

The oldest part of this palace—that which included a Tudor hall and chapel—was originally part of the London house of the Archbishops of York and known for that reason as York Place. When

Cardinal Wolsey in 1514 became Archbishop he at once set about enlarging, rebuilding and splendidly decorating his official residence. As he grew in power and wealth he lived in greater state and magnificence than any man in the country, his master King Henry VIII included. That monarch's London residence was then the ancient palace of Westminster, where the historic grandeur of a few impressive apartments like the great hall hardly compensated for the medieval standards of comfort provided by the rest of the palace. Henry VIII greatly envied Wolsey his princely lodgings at York Place, and when the Cardinal fell from favour and made over his possessions to the King, the latter moved there almost at once. Officially this new royal residence was now, with the adjacent park, joined to Westminster Palace to form "the King's Palace at Westminster", but it soon acquired the name Whitehall and thereafter no sovereign actually lived in the old Palace of Westminster proper, though it retained its pre-eminence as the legislative and judicial centre of government.

Henry VIII further enlarged Whitehall, mainly by taking in land between the main road (now Whitehall) and St. James's Park. Here he built a series of what may be called pleasure buildings—tennis courts, a bowling alley, as well as a house for banquets.

In 1581, however, Queen Elizabeth I built a large timber banquetting house nearer to her great hall and private apartments; parts of this survive among the foundations of the present structure. This timber building was replaced in 1606 by a stone and brick structure, which was burnt down in 1619. Commands for the immediate replacement of the burnt building were given forthwith—a fact which points to the importance of the structure in the life of the palace.

The old great hall, which had served the Tudors well enough, was indeed still the centre of court life, the scene of banquets and even of plays from time to time, but was so much the heart of the palace that it was not always convenient that it should be set aside for special purposes. The provision of an *ad hoc* banquetting house answered the problem: it was the right size to be prepared as and when necessary for special occasions. Such occasions might indeed be banquets or the ceremonial reception of embassies, but more often in early Stuart days they had to do with masques.

The masque was the principal court entertainment of the day. Descended from the mummings of the Middle Ages and the junketings associated with the Twelve Days of Christmas, masques are first mentioned by name in Henry VIII's time. At first they were little more than charades with dancing, but by the beginning of the seventeenth century were becoming more elaborate—dialogue and even scenery being introduced. The performers, however, remained

amateur—they were members of the court and might even include the King and Queen. The only “professionals” were the poets who wrote the words and the artists who designed the scenery: of the former Ben Jonson was the leader, of the latter Inigo Jones.

Jonson found the masque a glorified charade, but increasingly gave words to his courtly actors, significance to their speeches and something like a plot to the spectacle as a whole. The spectacular side, however, lay with Inigo Jones, to whom as an architect the spectacle was of prime importance and the masque “nothing else but pictures with light and motion”. Thus though the two men had begun collaboration amicably enough as far back as 1605, they eventually quarrelled. Jonson became inordinately jealous of Jones and though the new Banqueting House opened in 1622 with Jonson’s *Masque of Augurs*, most of the masques performed there were by writers like Davenant. After the Rubens paintings were set in the ceiling in 1635 no more masques were performed in the building lest the lamp-smoke should damage the paintings; and a new wooden masquing house was set up nearby in 1639. But the Banqueting House continued to be used as the main ceremonial centre for the next sixty years.

The Execution of Charles I

However notable the Banqueting House in the history of architecture and painting, its popular fame rests on its association with the execution of Charles I.

In Westminster Hall on Saturday morning, 27th January 1648/9, the revolutionary court “for the trying and judging of Charles Stuart, King of England” ordered that he should “be put to death by severing of his Head from his Body”. He was then taken to St. James’s Palace, where the next day he took leave of his two youngest children, Princess Elizabeth and Henry, Duke of Gloucester. With him as spiritual comforter was William Juxon, then Bishop of London.

On the morning of his execution, 30th January, the King rose a little before six o’clock. It was bitter cold and he put on an extra shirt, lest he should tremble with cold and men might think it was with fear. Bishop Juxon gave him Communion. At ten o’clock he was escorted on foot across St. James’s Park and up the Park Stairs to the first floor of the Holbein Gate, by which he passed, above the murmuring crowd in the street below, to the Privy Gallery and thence to his private rooms in the heart of the palace, to await the last summons. It was after noon before it came. “A guard was made all along the galleries and the Banqueting House”, says a contemporary, “but behind the soldiers abundance of men and women crowded in, though with some peril to their persons, to behold the saddest sight

England ever saw". After passing through the hall, the King was taken probably by the staircase window on to the scaffold. This had been set up at the very entrance to the palace: the King was to suffer at his own front door.

Black drapery over the rails of the scaffold hid the King from the crowd below, but the neighbouring roof-tops were thronged with spectators, who marvelled at the courage of the King's bearing. He found it impossible to address the crowd, but spoke at length, about the principles for which he was to die, to those about him on the scaffold, including the shorthand writers who were there to record his dying speech. He then spoke a little with Bishop Juxon, who was with him to the last, and handed him his badge of the Garter. Then, after short prayers, he laid his head on the low block and, after a little pause, the executioner severed it with a single blow.

The Commonwealth

After the King's death the Palace of Whitehall was generally neglected until Oliver Cromwell went to live there as Lord Protector. Thereafter the Banqueting House continued to be used on state occasions, in particular for the reception of ambassadors and the like. The ceiling paintings remained unharmed, though their sentiments can hardly have been congenial to the new regime. And a scheme for painting a large picture of Parliament at one end of the room and the Council of State at the other was never carried out.

The Restoration

The palace came back to life in 1660, when on 29th May both Houses of Parliament assembled in the Banqueting House to welcome King Charles II and "in two shining Speeches testify'd their Vows of Affection and Fidelity to the utmost Degree of Loyalty".

Many and splendid were the receptions for foreign embassies, sent to welcome the restored monarch. The diaries of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, as well as the newspapers which had come into existence, abound with descriptions of lavish gifts and lavish hospitality. The Russian Ambassador, for example, had a retinue 165 strong, who paraded before the King, seated beneath a great canopy at the south end, such gifts as fur-lined mantles, Persian carpets, hawks and horses, "wind musick playing all the while in the galleries above".

Here, too, were held most of the traditional ceremonies associated with the sovereign, the grandest being probably the St. George's Day dinner for the Knights of the Garter. Evelyn describes that of 1667. The King sat on a throne at the south end, at a table alone, and the

Knights sat on the King's right at a long table stretching all the length of the room and had opposite them "a cupbord of rich gilded Plate". From the galleries above came the sound of "Wind musique, Trumpets and kettle drumms". "About the middle of dinner, the Knights drank the Kings health, then the King theirs: Then the trumpets, musique &c: plaied and sounded, the Gunns going off at the Tower. . . . The Cheere was extraordinary, each knight having 40 dishes to his messe. . . . The roome hung with the richest Tapisstry [tapestry] in the World".

The Banqueting House was also the setting for the ancient custom of "touching" for the King's Evil—the curing of the scrofulous by the touch of the sovereign's hands—a ceremony which had its own form of service. The King sat as usual on his throne beneath the canopy. After a reading from the Gospel, the surgeons brought to the King the sick, "who kneeling, the King strokes their faces or cheekes with both his hands at once: at which instant a Chaplaine in his formalities, says, 'He put his hands upon them, and he healed them' ". Later in the service the King placed round their necks a white ribbon to which was attached a small gold coin or "angel".

The practice became immensely popular after the Restoration, but when King William III came to the throne in 1688 he would have none of it and referred "patients" to his exiled predecessor, King James II. Queen Anne revived the custom and "touched" the infant Samuel Johnson, who later faintly recalled her as "a lady in diamonds and a long black hood". On her death the practice ceased in England.

Another ancient rite was the Maundy Thursday celebration, which also had its own form of service (now normally held in Westminster Abbey). The traditional washing by the sovereign of the feet of the poor lasted till the time of King James II. King William, however, deputed that office to his almoner and the practice was finally abandoned in 1754. The custom of distributing silver pennies to the poor was begun by King Charles II. They also received gifts in kind, like parcels of food and clothing.

The last great national ceremony to take place in the Banqueting House was on 13th February 1689, when William and Mary received the formal offer of the crown from the estates of the realm. "Their Highnesses were Graciously pleased to signifie their consent to accept the Crown . . . whereupon there were shouts of joy both in the Banqueting House and in all the Courts of Whitehall. Then the Lords and Commons came down to Whitehall Gate [at the north end of the Banqueting House] where . . . York Herald did . . . proclaim the Prince and Princess of Orange King and Queen of England, France and Ireland".

Thereafter the Banqueting House declined in importance. King William suffered from asthma and preferred the healthier air of his new palace at Kensington to the damps of riverside Whitehall, coming to the latter only as tradition or ceremony demanded. Ceremony, indeed, figured less prominently than it had in Charles II's time. But such foreign delegations as came were still received in the Banqueting House; and there in 1694 the body of Queen Mary lay in state.

The fire of 1698 ended the ceremonial importance of the Banqueting House. Fire had always been a major risk in the rambling palace of Whitehall, with its many timber and half-timber buildings and its wooden galleries, and there were regulations which required, for example, that for every chimney there should be a leather bucket filled with water; but they were not very effective and the palace was nearly burnt down in 1691. Then, on 10th April 1698, a careless maidservant set some drying linen too close to a charcoal fire. The resulting blaze spread quickly to the rest of the palace and fifteen hours later only the Banqueting House and the Holbein and Whitehall Gates were left of the principal buildings. The life of Whitehall as the sovereign's residence was at an end.

Schemes for rebuilding were drawn up by Sir Christopher Wren, schemes that recall in scale similar abortive projects devised by Inigo Jones for Charles I, but nothing came of them, for whatever reason. Expense must have been a factor, and the disinclination of the widowed and ageing sovereign.

Among the buildings destroyed in the fire were the Tudor chapel built by Cardinal Wolsey and the Roman Catholic chapel built by Wren for James II. There was therefore no Chapel Royal in the Whitehall area. It was decided that the Banqueting House should be used for this purpose and Wren was told to begin at once the process of conversion, which was completed by Christmas 1698, when the King went to service there.

All trace of Wren's work was swept away in the nineteenth century, but contemporary prints show a tall screen facing southwards and set about thirty feet from the present main entrance doorway, the space behind it being used as an ante-chapel. The pulpit was on the east (or river) side and opposite stood the organ, made in 1699 by "Father Smith", the King's Musical Instrument Maker, and now at the Tower of London. The body of the chapel was filled with pews facing inward in collegiate fashion.

This arrangement continued little altered for nearly a century, until James Wyatt was given the task of altering the interior so that the Horse Guards could attend services. He provided the extra accommodation by making an additional gallery (now happily removed)

just beneath the original one. Wyatt was also responsible for rebuilding the north part of the Banqueting House block—that part which contains the staircase. The rebuilt structure of brick rendered in cement is set back from the Whitehall frontage of the main structure to which it is linked visually by the Portland stone balustrade above.

The military use ended in 1829 and for the next eight years Sir John Soane and Sir Robert Smirke carried out a general restoration of the whole structure. The former completed the refacing of the crumbling exterior in Portland stone (begun some fifty years earlier by Sir William Chambers) and thus abolished Jones's subtle use of different coloured stones for the exterior. In general the interior was brought back to something like what it must have been in Jones's time; the main change was the construction at the north end of a new organ loft, carried on two pairs of Ionic columns. The building continued to be used as a chapel until 1890, when Queen Victoria agreed to the proposal of the Chapel Royal Commissioners that the building, which had never been consecrated, should no longer serve as a chapel. In the same year it was granted to the Royal United Service Institution for use as a museum. Shortly afterwards Sir Aston Webb built for the Institution their existing premises immediately south of the Banqueting House, linking the two structures by a large central doorway matching the entrance at the other end. He also provided direct access to the galleries by making a fourth gallery along the south wall.

The museum use of the structure ended in 1963. The interior of the hall was redecorated in the original colours in the following year, lavatories and similar offices being provided in the basement.

DESCRIPTION

THE building lies parallel to Whitehall, its western façade looking across the street to the Horse Guards. To the north stands the old War Office and the street between the two buildings occupies the site of the Whitehall Gate, which was the main entrance to the palace. The latter's eastern limit (i.e. towards the river) can be seen just beyond the massive white block of the Ministry of Defence in the Embankment Gardens, where a short length is preserved of the late seventeenth-century river wall and of some steps leading to the river, formerly called Queen Mary's Steps.

The hall's two main elevations—to Whitehall and to the river—are similar. Today built entirely of Portland stone, they had originally an Oxfordshire stone basement with Northamptonshire stone above. Against this rather buff background the main features of the façade—

columns, pilasters, window architraves—must have been clearly defined, since they alone were made of the white stone of Portland.

The building is entered by Wyatt's rebuilt staircase wing, with an eighteenth-century bust of Charles I above the doorway. On the roof above is a large wrought-iron weather-cock, of late seventeenth-century date. It is said to have been put there so that James II could see whether the winds were favourable for the ships bringing his successor, William of Orange, to England.

Interior

The entrance vestibule contains a doorway on the right leading to a brick vaulted basement, now given over to lavatories and similar offices, and the main stone staircase which leads to the principal floor and the hall itself. The latter is entered by a tall and wide doorway, the main processional entrance.

The hall proper, of impressive dimensions, measures approximately 110 feet long by 55 feet broad and high—it is in fact a double cube, a proportion favoured by Jones and the Italian and classical architects he had studied in Italy. The room is divided into two levels by a balustraded balcony with Ionic wall-pilasters below and Corinthian above. The ceiling is in nine great panels, the largest 28 feet by 20 feet. The north [entrance] doorway, called "the Greate Doore" in the records, and formerly rather more elaborate, is surmounted by Le Sueur's bust of James I—probably copied from the effigy made for that King's funeral hearse, which was designed by Inigo Jones and executed partly by Le Sueur.

On the south wall, that opposite the entrance, is another large doorway, made by Sir Aston Webb to connect the Banqueting House with the Royal United Service Institution. In Stuart days its place was occupied by the royal throne and canopy and there was then no gallery above. Originally there were galleries only on the other three walls; of these the north gallery was enlarged by Smirke c.1830 to provide an organ loft.

When in use for its original purpose the Banqueting House, or Hall as we should perhaps call it in the present context, was never furnished in the conventional sense of the word. It was built for various uses and each particular use involved appropriate decoration. On the receptions of ambassadors, for example, the walls were lined with some of the many sets of tapestries from the royal collection. By the same token the hall might be dressed with appropriate tapestries, say during the Christmas season. Its use (until 1635) as the masquing house meant again that it should be kept as empty as possible, so that the staging, seating and "machinery" associated

with that court pastime could be readily brought in. And it has been noted above that ceremonies like the St. George's Feast of the Knights of the Garter demanded their own disposition of the interior.

The Paintings

Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), Flemish by birth, was the greatest painter of his day. Nor were his talents limited to painting, for he was sent on important diplomatic missions by his King. When, therefore, he visited England in 1629 with the task of improving relations between that country and Spain his visit had two aspects: he was greeted as both a painter and a diplomat.

The King and the immediate court circle had long admired Rubens' paintings and he was now commissioned to fill the vast spaces of the Banqueting House ceiling with allegorical paintings commemorating the King's father, James I, and setting forth the blessings of the monarchical rule of the Stuarts. Rubens, who was then at the height of his powers, had just completed similar commissions at Antwerp and at the new Luxembourg Palace in Paris, and doubtless welcomed this further opportunity for large-scale painting in the grand manner. He made some preliminary sketches and then, knighted and laden with gifts, returned to the continent to set to work.

The paintings were finished in 1634, though delays over export and import dues delayed their despatch to England till the following year. Rubens' fee was £3,000. Once the paintings were in place no more masques were held in the Banqueting House, lest they should be damaged by smoke from the lamps.

The ceiling is arranged with the major paintings down the centre. These are flanked by ovals showing the Triumph of Virtue over Vice (at the angles) and by processions of cherubs.

NOTE: *The paintings were meant to be seen from the Westminster or south end, where the throne with its canopy stood, and are best viewed by going to that end and moving northwards towards the entrance doorway.*

1. South end, centre: *The Benefits of the Government of James I.* King James watches from his throne while Wisdom (attired as Minerva) defends the throne against War, shown as Mars with a firebrand trampling on the King's enemies, while Mercury (on the left) points to the nether regions as their destination. With a sweeping gesture the King indicates Peace and Plenty, now free to enrich his subjects, while a cherub holds aloft the royal crown.

2. South, left, oval: Abundance (or Royal Bounty), holding the cornucopia symbolic of plenty, bestrides the bound figure of Avarice.

3. South, right, oval: Reason (or Wise Government) gently but firmly holds a bridle, above the crumpled figure of Intemperate Discord.

4. Centre, oval: The deification or *Apotheosis of James I*. The venerable monarch is about to be raised to heaven as a reward for his earthly labours. To his right two female figures probably symbolise Religion (with urn) and Scriptural Truth (with book). The King's earthly crown and orb are borne away by cherubs, while other cherubs hold the palm of peace and announce with a fanfare the royal ascension. Above, flying figures bear the symbols of Mercury (the classical conductor of the departed) and a laurel wreath.

5. and 6. Centre, left and right: Processions of cherubs in the manner of a Bacchic triumph and representing Joyous Prosperity.

7. North end, centre: *The Union of England and Scotland*. James I, in full regalia, leans forward from his throne as if in judgment with a gesture of acceptance towards a naked child, who symbolises the new-born union of the northern and southern kingdoms. The child is supported by figures representing England and Scotland and above his head Britannia holds the joined crowns, united under the Stuart dynasty. Winged cherubs above carry the arms of the United Kingdom.

8. North, left, oval: Heroic Virtue, in the guise of Hercules, crushes Envy or Rebellion with his club.

9. North, right, oval: Heroic Wisdom, in the guise of Minerva, strikes Ignorance with her spear.

The five framed pictures, one on the staircase wall and the others in the hall itself, illustrate incidents in the flight of Charles II after the battle of Worcester, when he hid in the woods at Boscobel till Royalist supporters contrived his escape. They were painted shortly after the Restoration by Isaac Fuller (1606-72) and are here shown by kind permission of their owner, the Earl of Arran. The subjects are:

1. On the staircase: The King asleep in the lap of Colonel Carless in the branches of the Boscobel Oak.

2. Hall, north-east: Colonel Carless presenting himself to the King at Boscobel.

3. North-west: The King being helped to change his clothes by William Penderel.

4. South-east: The King astride Humphry Penderel's "dull jade", led by one of the loyal Penderel brothers.

5. South-west: The King, in servant's clothes, riding pillion with Jane Lane to Abbots Leigh.

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